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Addressing Distance Learning Barriers in Indonesia Amid the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Key Messages

- The rapid spread of the Covid-19 pandemic has created a disruption in Indonesia's education sector as around 45 million students are unable to continue their learning activity in schools.
- The Ministry of Education and Culture (MOEC) and the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA) need to consider distance learning approaches that are adjusted to regional characteristics. Distance learning exacerbates barriers of vulnerable students to access education, so diversification of the delivery medium beyond the Internet should be considered. Options may include radio programs or postal services for regions with low connectivity.
- Local governments need to take on a more active role in aiding the schools than initiatives by the central government. In addition to using existing School Operational Assistance (*Bantuan Operasional Sekolah*/BOS) funds, local education authorities need to provide schools with further financial support and technical assistance, such as access to recording studios and equipment, to accelerate their adoption of distance learning. Such assistance should not neglect private community schools.
- Indonesia needs to embark on a large-scale capacity building program to better execute distance learning across regions. This requires updating the strategy and supervision on BOS utilization, upgrading capacities of school principals and allowing them to assume greater autonomy at schools, and equipping teachers with hard and soft skills for distance learning.
- The Covid-19 crisis demonstrates a need for large-scale public-private partnerships between relevant ministries (MOEC and MORA) and telecommunication and hardware providers. This builds on existing infrastructure to spread distance learning across the archipelago.



Vulnerabilities in Indonesia's Distance Learning Efforts During the Covid-19 Crisis

Approximately 91.3% or around 1.5 billion students enrolled worldwide are unable to attend schools due to the Covid-19 pandemic as of 17th April 2020 (UNESCO, 2020). This includes around 45 million students in Indonesia or roughly three percent of the affected global student population (Statistics Indonesia, 2020)¹.

The rapid spread of Covid-19 has forced governments to close schools and enforce at-home distance learning. Various initiatives are underway to ensure study activities continue despite absence of face-to-face schooling.

Technology, in particular the Internet, smartphones, and laptops are now widely used to support distance learning. One of the largest mobile telecommunication providers in Indonesia recorded an increase in broadband traffic of as much as 16% during the Covid-19 crisis, mainly attributed to a sharp spike in online learning platforms usage (Olavia, 2020).

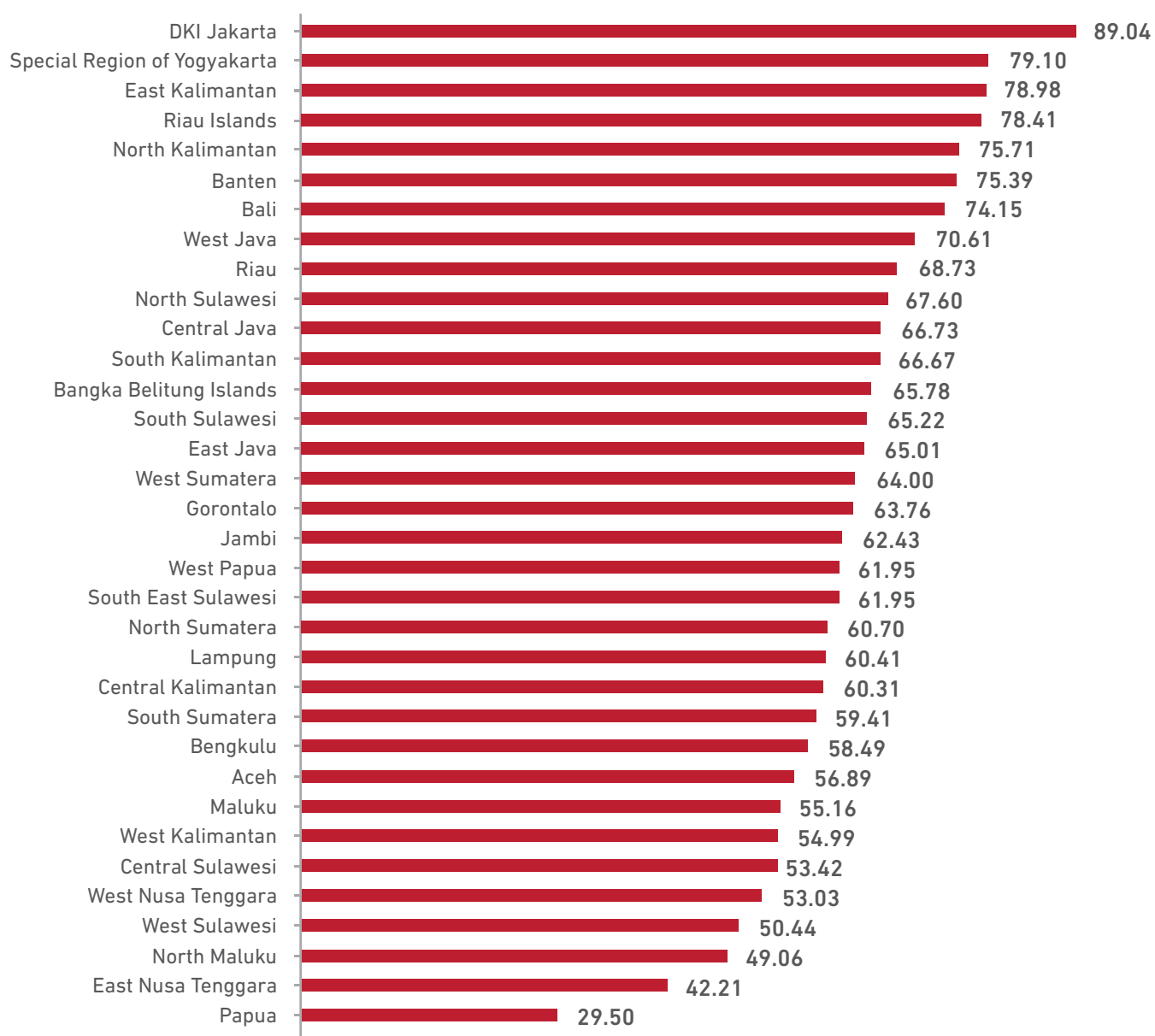
However, the disruption of traditional education systems has put students from low-income families and rural areas at a disadvantage. These are students who, even in normal conditions, are already facing access barriers to education. They now need to overcome additional barriers brought about by the inequality in accessing technology infrastructure.

The archipelagic and mountainous topography of Indonesia favours mobile Internet and telecommunication provisions. However, 4G coverage is mainly concentrated in Java island as market-driven mobile telecommunication providers naturally prioritize urban areas over less densely populated rural areas (Khatri, 2019). Figure 1 highlights this uneven distribution of household internet connections across the regions. These connectivity gaps put students from low-income families in rural areas outside Java at a great disadvantage.

The sudden shift from face-to-face methods in the classroom to distance learning at home also exposes the need for teacher capacity building. Several studies show that ICT competencies of Indonesian teachers are unevenly spread across regions (Widodo & Riandi, 2013 cited in Koh et al, 2018). In addition to this, there is a persistent disparity in education quality across regions of Indonesia, especially between Java and outside Java, and across socio-economic conditions (Azzizah, 2015; Muttaqin 2018). The uneven access to the Internet, the disparity in teacher qualifications and education quality, and the lack of ICT skills are becoming a vulnerability in Indonesia's distance learning initiative.

¹ Not including students in Islamic education institutions such as *Madrasah* and *Pesantren*

Figure 1.
Internet Access (percent) per Household by Provinces in 2018



Source: Statistics Indonesia, 2018.

Government's Response to the Covid-19 Crisis

The Ministry of Education and Culture (MOEC) began implementing early measures to prevent the spread of Covid-19 at schools through Circular Letter No. 3/2020 which mostly advises on hygiene and sanitation practices on school premises. This letter was issued two days before the World Health Organization (WHO) upgraded Covid-19 status to global pandemic on 11th March (WHO, 2020).



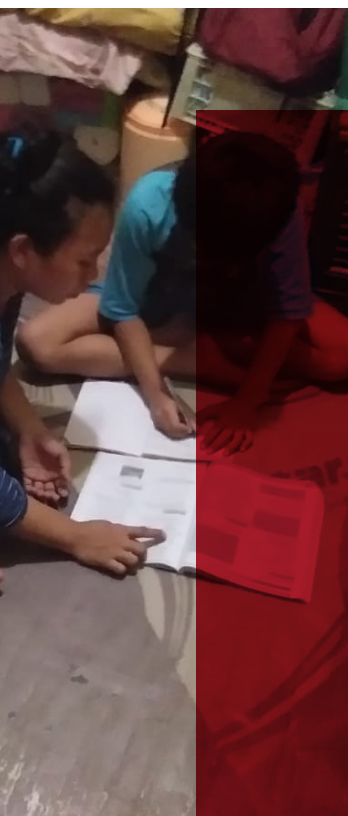
As the outbreak escalated, MOEC then decided to suspend all school activities and opted for at-home online/ distance learning through its Circular Letter No. 4/2020. The Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA), which oversees *Madrasah* (Islamic schools), followed suit with a Circular Letter No. B-686.1/DJ.I.I/PP.00/03/2020.

MOEC grants freedom for each school to choose their preferred online learning platforms (MOEC, 2020a). However, to encourage knowledge sharing, it provides a free online learning portal called '*Rumah Belajar*' and an online-learning sharing platform for teachers called '*Program Guru Berbagi*.' *Rumah Belajar* provides learning materials and a communication feature for its users, while *Program Guru Berbagi* shares lesson-plans (*Rencana Pelaksanaan Pembelajaran/RPP*) with teachers across Indonesia. For regions where internet connection is patchy, the government cooperates with TVRI, the state-owned television broadcaster, in delivering school materials under the "*Belajar di Rumah*" program for a few months (Beritasatu, 2020).

The Covid-19 crisis also forces schools to re-allocate more budget for distance learning expenses. MOEC Regulation No. 19/2020 and MORA Circular Letter No. B-699/Dt.I.I/PP.03/03/2020 allow the use of School Operational Assistance (BOS) funding for distance learning. This includes internet costs for students and teachers and equipment purchase.

Through Presidential Regulation No. 54/2020, MOEC's budget was increased by 96%, from IDR 36 trillion to 70.7 trillion. It has not been publicized what this massive increase will be utilized for, but many expect this to be used to further support distance learning initiatives.

On the local government level, the Education Agency of DKI Jakarta (*Dinas Pendidikan DKI Jakarta*) has issued Circular Letters on the provisions of distance learning. The agency dedicates a section on their website for information on conducting distance learning. It also provides guidelines on how to utilize "*SiPintar by Simak*", which is DKI Jakarta's integrated school information system, to access online learning modules. The website also provides Google Classroom tutorials for teachers, a program scheduled for "*Belajar di Rumah*" on TVRI, and a learning platform for vocational students called "*WeKiddo SMK Bisa*." Jakarta's local government also obliges school principals to periodically report their distance learning progress.



Private Sector's Response to the Covid-19 Crisis

Indonesian private sector stakeholders in education have provided various ready-to-use solutions to support the implementation of distance learning. MOEC started cooperating with online learning providers and technology companies (MOEC, 2020). The learning platforms have allowed free access to some, if not all, of its contents during the pandemic. Some telecommunication companies also provide free internet quota to access online learning opportunities (Budiansyah, 2020).

Not only businesses, but private schools also adapted to the new situation. Private community schools in the poorest areas of Jakarta (Low-Cost Private Schools / LCPS) initiated a semi-online approach for distance learning. They use the WhatsApp messaging platform, which is ubiquitous in Indonesia, to conduct classroom discussions and distribute tasks and school materials. Those who do not have the supporting devices are encouraged to borrow smartphones or laptops from their relatives.

LCPS charge marginal fees for educating students from low income families while maintaining a degree of financial independence from the government's budget (McLoughlin, 2013 cited in Rahman, 2016). These schools are often overlooked in the education system but they play a critical role in educating children from low income families by providing affordable and high-quality education. Since they would have very limited resources to make the switch to distance learning, MOEC should extend its support to these schools as well.

Policy Recommendations for the Indonesian Government

- **Adjust distance learning practices according to the conditions of specific regions**

To supplement TVRI programs in regions with little internet coverage, education delivery through radio should be an alternative, reflecting from experiences in other countries such as Argentina and Fiji. The Argentinian government provides seven hours of radio content hosted by experienced teachers through its state-owned radio network during school closure while the Fijian government cooperates with two radio stations to provide literacy and numeracy lessons for grade 1 to 8 students as well as those in early childhood education (The World Bank, 2020). The Indonesian government should also cooperate with the postal service to help teachers distribute printed worksheets and modules for students, drawing from positive experiences in France (AFP, 2020).

- **Establish local task forces that provide assistance**

With no clear end date for the pandemic, MOEC is currently preparing distance learning provisions until the end of this year (CNN Indonesia, 2020). While distance learning activities are mainly

dependent on school initiatives and resources from MOEC, local governments also need to assist schools by establishing local task forces that provide further financial aid in addition to BOS and access to recording studios and equipment for schools and teachers. This local task force should pay special attention to the LCPS which play an important role in providing education to the urban poor but have the least resources compared to regular public and more endowed private schools (Rahman, 2016; Wikaningtyas, 2017).

- **Develop a supervision framework and strategy for BOS utilization**

MOEC should consider developing a robust supervision framework to monitor the use of BOS for distance learning. Such supervision not only helps ensure that the funds are used according to ministerial intentions, but also to identify which areas need most assistance. MOEC should also consider whether this expansion will be temporary in nature or if there are components that can be adopted permanently.

- **Granting greater autonomy to school principals**
BOS can now be used by schools to support vulnerable families struggling with the additional costs of internet packages and phone credits, but this was only specified one month after the start of distance learning in mid-March. This delay could have been prevented, if school principals had greater autonomy to disburse BOS funds without having to seek approval from MOEC or MORA.

Greater autonomy in an emergency like the Covid-19 crisis is important, especially for public school principals. This requires both flexibility of the bureaucracy and better decision-making capacities of school principals. As MOEC has already decentralised some decision making authority to individual schools, it can broaden this effort to cover BOS utilization, especially in emergencies. Conversely, MOEC should consider inserting budget management skills into its school leadership transformation agenda which MORA can also adopt for schools under their purview (OECD, 2017; MOEC, 2020c).

- **Equip teachers with skills to conduct distance learning**

While distance learning has been the most far-reaching disruption in the education sector even before the pandemic, the current crisis has accelerated its adoption significantly. It is important to include distance learning skills in future teacher training programs.

The use of information and communication technologies (ICT) has already been included in training curricula. However, there are doubts about their effectiveness and as these are largely disconnected from distance learning. For successful adoption of distance learning, teachers need not only possess basic technological skills (such as how to use a PC and connect to the Internet), but also knowledge in the use of recording devices and software, as well as methods to deliver lessons without face-to-face interaction. These skills will be needed

when utilizing existing online learning platforms in Indonesia. More importantly, the gap between training scenarios and on-field execution needs to be narrowed.

Considering this, distance learning should be integrated in MOEC's long-term teacher education program (*Program Pendidikan Profesi Guru/PPG*).

- **Foster public-private partnerships in the education sector**

While public-private partnerships involving online learning platforms have proliferated in recent years, Indonesia has yet to overcome its digital divide. The Covid-19 crisis could kick start public private partnerships on a larger scale to fill this systemic gap, as demonstrated by experiences in Hongkong. There, a consortium of diverse stakeholders from educational organizations and the entertainment industry, which provide free learning materials during Covid-19, has decided to maintain the service even after the pandemic will have been curbed (Tan and El Azar, 2020). Such cooperation should also be considered in Indonesia. Finally, MOEC and MORA also need to evaluate the feasibility of public-private partnerships with technology providers in the procurement of infrastructure to support online/distance learning.

As the recently completed undersea fiber optic infrastructure which connects all Indonesian provinces (the "*Palapa Ring Project*") is still underused, MOEC and MORA should explore opportunities to partner up with telecommunication and hardware providers to equip all schools, especially those in rural area, with Internet connection, ICT facilities and skill development programs for teachers. Creativity will be required in considering the cooperation format. This could include guarantees by the ministries on minimum mobile data uptake or entering into bulk lease agreements for ICT equipment. ICT trainings for teachers could become part of the agreements with the vendors.

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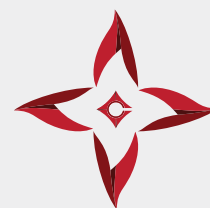
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